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ABSTRACT

The history of technology use in adult literacy programs was reviewed, and attitudes enhancing and limiting the use of technology were examined. Among the key findings of the analysis were the following: (1) the value of technology for literacy instruction is based on its provision of privacy, individual control, immediate feedback, and flexibility for learners; (2) the process of selecting appropriate technology must take into account the larger themes and issues currently being debated in adult literacy, including the nature of the learner, purpose of literacy instruction, and issues of evaluation and accountability; and (3) because of the marked differences among the various types of programs (including workplace literacy, family literacy, and English as a second language), context should be the primary determinant for selection of appropriate technology. Among the study recommendations were the following: technology selection should be based on previously identified needs/problems within the literacy program; practitioners need to teach adult learners to access information rather than sound out words; and as issues of access and equity are debated in the fields of literacy and technology, practitioners need to provide leadership in determining the future of technology in the adult literacy field. (MN)

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BRIEF

Literacy and Machines: An Overview of the Use of Technology in Adult Literacy Programs

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KEY FINDINGS:

- The value of technology for adult literacy instruction is based on its provision of privacy, individual control, immediate feedback, and flexibility for learners
- The selection of appropriate technology must take into account the larger themes and issues currently debated in adult literacy, such as the nature of the learner, purpose of literacy instruction, and issues of evaluation and accountability.
- Context should be the primary determinant for appropriate technology selection since there are marked differences among the programs for work force literacy, family literacy, adult basic education, GED, corrections, libraries, and English as a second language.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Technology selection should be based on a previously identified need or problem within the literacy program, and instructional software should be selected for its ability to address that specific gap in the curriculum.
- Practitioners need to teach adult learners how to access information rather than sound out words; technology becomes the means by which information and knowledge can be acquired.
- The use of technology in adult literacy programs is enhanced or limited by philosophic and historic traditions within the literacy field. An understanding of these traditions facilitates technology decision making and places the decision in a larger context.
- As issues of access and equity are debated in the fields of literacy and technology, practitioners need to provide leadership in determining the future of technology in the adult literacy field.

INTRODUCTION

At a time when literacy is attracting widespread recognition as a critical national issue, technology adds a new and complicated dimension to the literacy debate. Conferences, books, and symposia have been devoted to defining the literacy/technology connection. However, as academics continue to debate this connection and its benefits, literacy program administrators are still buying computers and teachers are still selecting software based mainly on word-of-mouth recommendations. By providing an overview of the use of technology in adult literacy programs, this report helps administrators and teachers define their specific technology needs.

METHODOLOGY

A brief overview of the history of technology use in adult literacy programs and of the attitudes that can enhance or limit the use of technology introduce the report, which then goes on to summarize current applications of technology in adult literacy programs. The report addresses the following questions and issues: (a) How can decision makers sort through the claims made by hardware and software vendors? (b) How can scarce resources be found to purchase technology? (c) How can new technology be incorporated into the existing curriculum? A framework for incorporating technology into the adult literacy curriculum is also provided.

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IMPLICATIONS

The implications of increased technology use in adult literacy programs are many and diverse. Technology will be used for ongoing student assessment and ultimately for program accountability as extensive databases are compiled and analyzed. Electronic bulletin boards have already been successfully used to facilitate parent-child, child-child, and teacher-teacher communication. Employers are finding that videos, computer software, and tapes are ideal media for providing the type of instruction required in workplaces. Software program authoring tools are increasingly used to develop practice exercises for learners with specific job or instructional needs. Correctional officers view the use of technology as a way of reducing recidivism. Through interactive TV and electronic networking, prisoners become part of the community prior to release, thus easing the difficult transitional phase. The availability of technology has often been the major attraction for adult learners in library literacy programs. Moreover, adult learners are pleased to find that instructional technologies offer them the privacy, immediate feedback, and flexibility in terms of time and place of study that are essential for maintaining self-esteem and progress in any literacy program.

FURTHER READING

Miller-Parker, D. (1993). *Instructional technology resource guide for staff development*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy.

Office of Technology Assessment. (1993). *Adult literacy and new technologies: Tools for a lifetime* (OTA-SET-550). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

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